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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 THE HAGUE 002735

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: CAUTIOUS DUTCH REACTION TO EC REPORT ON TURKEY

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1. (SBU) Summary: The Dutch government has officially characterized the October 6 European Commission report on Turkey, including its recommendation that a date be set for accession negotiations, as "a good basis for decision making by the European Council in December." Parliament also received the report favorably, with all major parties in favor of starting negotiations -- albeit disagreeing on when. The Dutch public, however, remains skeptical about Turkey's European credentials, although calls for a referendum on Turkish accession have so far gained no momentum. The government will continue to tread cautiously on Turkey, seeking to balance its EU Presidency obligations against the mixed feelings of Dutch citizens while trying to avoid divisions within the ruling coalition. End summary.

Government's public reaction

2. (SBU) Immediately following the October 6 publication of the EC report on Turkey, acting Dutch Prime Minister Gerrit Zalm described the report as "thorough and balanced" and "a good basis" for decision making in December." Zalm, who had formerly been highly critical of Turkish accession to the EU, stopped short of endorsing beginning negotiations, but stressed that Dutch citizens should be "reassured" by Commission proposals for an extended transition period for Turkish migrants after accession and the condition that accession not drain the EU budget. He also stressed that "positive developments" in the areas of human rights, freedom of speech, and religious freedom "must continue." Perhaps anticipating domestic criticism of the government's response to the report, Zalm emphasized that the Netherlands' "mouth is gagged" while it holds the EU Presidency as other member states monitor Dutch comments closely.

3. (SBU) A few days later on October 15, the GONL sent a letter to parliament reiterating Zalm's earlier comments. Again finding the Report to be "a good basis for decision making in December," the letter stated that "The decision on whether or not to open negotiations will have to take into account the suggestions and issues raised by the Commission" -- again stopping short of an outright endorsement of beginning negotiations.

4. (SBU) Explaining the government's letter to the press, acting Prime Minister Zalm hinted that the Dutch cabinet was itself divided on how soon negotiations with Turkey should begin. He was confident, however, that the cabinet would have a clear position on the matter by the time of the December European Council. Zalm described Foreign Minister Bot's public speculation that negotiations could probably start in the second half of 2005 (and could not be put off until 2008, as some suggested) as premature.

Parliament's reaction

5. (SBU) The Commission report was well received in the Dutch parliament. All the main political parties supported starting negotiations with Turkey on the conditions proposed by the Commission. They remain divided, however, as to when these negotiations should begin. Spokesmen for the coalition Christian Democratic (CDA) and Liberal (VVD) parties urged caution; CDA floorleader Verhagen, for example, argued against setting a date until Turkey is in full compliance with the Copenhagen criteria on respect for human rights and the rule of law. Verhagen and the spokesmen for the other major parties, however, also made clear that they would not bind the government's hands, and that they would support an EU consensus decision.

Public opinion skeptical but can be won over

6. (SBU) Large elements of public, and some smaller parties in parliament, remain skeptical about the benefits of Turkish accession. Geert Wilders, the former VVD (Liberal) party member who recently split with the party leadership on this issue, continues to attract followers from those worried about inflows of Turkish workers. Several recent

polls indicate that if a referendum on Turkish accession (as proposed in France) were held today, a majority would oppose. On the other hand, although some politicians, including VVD leader van Aartsen, have called for a such a referendum, so far there has been no obvious momentum for it.

17. (SBU) While skeptical, the Dutch public does not come out strongly opposed to starting negotiations on Turkish accession. According to an October 5 poll, 53 percent support starting negotiations, and 61 percent support future accession if Turkey has complied with a clear set of criteria. Supporters list among Turkey's advantages that it would be a bridge to the Arab world, that membership would enhance European security, and that Turkey would benefit to the Union's economy.

COMMENT:

18. (SBU) Although skeptical, the pragmatic Dutch seem prepared, in the main, to go along with an EU consensus decision to begin negotiations on Turkish accession on a date to be determined by the European Council in December. That said, underlying doubts about Turkish accession -- and suspicions about the EU in general -- still have the potential to create domestic political challenges for the coalition, especially if Wilders or others are able to mobilize this dissatisfaction into an effective political force. For now, the government is treading cautiously rather than aggressively preparing the population for a positive decision in December.

Russel